

FACT SHEET: MULCH! MULCH! MULCH!

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Wood chips, lava rock, pea gravel, shredded rubber... what makes the best mulch for the landscape? Mulch is defined as any material applied to the soil surface for protection or improvement of the area covered. Ideally, wood-based, organic mulch is the best option in landscaped areas, for a variety of reasons.

- Retention of soil moisture around plants, reducing the need for irrigation;
- Reduction of soil erosion around plants, minimizing storm water runoff pollution;
- Regulation of soil temperature;
- Reduction of weeds; and
- As wood mulch decomposes, it becomes topsoil, returning minute amounts of nutrients to the soil.

There are many types of organic mulches available for purchase. Garden centers typically sell mulch in bags, while you can purchase mulch by the truckload from other suppliers. The most common retail mulches are pine bark, pine straw/needles, eucalyptus, and cypress. Other, less common mulches are melaleuca, compost, and recycled utility mulch.

Other forms of organic mulch can be found right in your own yard. Grass clippings, oak leaves, and pine needles make great sources of mulch. Leave grass-free spaces under deciduous trees and pines so that the fallen leaves and needles create self-mulching areas. Grass clippings, if left on the lawn after mowing, will decompose and return nutrients back to the lawn, contributing as much as 1/2 pound of nitrogen (N) over the course of a year.

Inorganic mulching materials like gravel, shell, crushed stone, and recycled tires are more permanent than wood mulch. In some cases, certain materials can be dyed to blend in with other hardscape features of the landscape or home. However, gravel and stone, when used near a lawn area, may be picked up and thrown by lawn mowers, becoming a hazard to others nearby. They can also reflect heat onto plants and cause the soil to dry out faster. Over time, shell may increase the pH of the soil, making it too alkaline for certain plants to grow well. Recycled tires have been shown to leach chemicals like zinc into the soil, causing more harm than good.

A Note about Cypress Mulch:

Bag labels often claim that cypress mulch has a natural resistance to pests. While this is true of old-growth cypress trees, it is not true of younger trees, which are more commonly shredded for mulch.

Some Mulches Explained...

Pine Bark

*Timber industry by-product
Good color retention
Large pieces tend to float away*

Pine Straw

*Timber industry by-product
Settles quickly*

Eucalyptus

*Produced from FL plantations
Light, reddish-brown color
Minimal settling over time*

Melaleuca (Punk Tree)

*Produced from an invasive exotic
Almost no settling over time
High termite resistance*

Yard Waste Mulch

*Mixed species mulch
Minimal settling over time
Color and size may vary*

Oak Leaves

*Free source of mulch
Create "self-mulching" areas under trees
Minimal settling over time*

When, Where, & How Should I Mulch?

Organic mulch may be applied to the landscape any time of the year. Newly-set plants should be mulched after they are planted and thoroughly watered. Because of the abundance of leaves and pine needles, fall is an excellent time to collect leaves and other yard trash for mulching plants.

Apply mulch to entire beds of shrubs, trees, annuals, perennials and/or ground covers, and re-apply as needed to maintain a three-inch depth. Be sure to pull the mulch away from the base of plants by at least two inches. Leaving mulch piled up on stems and trunks results in too much moisture and could lead to rot.

When mulching a newly-planted tree, create a circle of mulch two feet in diameter for every inch of tree trunk diameter. Additionally, avoid mulching directly over the root ball of the tree. Over time, the mulch will decompose and encourage tree roots to grow on the soil surface, rather than deeper in the soil.

In addition to being useful around plants, mulch can be used as a ground cover for walks, trails, driveways, and play and natural areas. It can be used temporarily to cover low-growing tender plants to protect them from frost injury. Mulch also can be composted and used as a soil amendment.

Pull mulch at least 12 inches from exterior walls of homes and other structures to discourage termites.



Don't create a mulch "volcano" around the base of plants.

How Much Mulch Should I Buy?

**DESIRED
DEPTH**
3" (.25 ft)

**COVERAGE
PER YD³**
108 feet²

**25 LBS
WILL COVER**
5 feet²

**30 LBS
WILL COVER**
6 feet²

1) Determine the square foot measurement of the area to be mulched.

EXAMPLE: 4 feet x 25 feet = 100 ft²

2) Multiply depth of mulch by the area to be covered (Step 1).

EXAMPLE: 0.25 ft x 100 ft² = 25 ft³

3) Bagged mulch is available in volumes such as 2 ft³. One cubic yard equals 27 ft³ (3ft x 3ft x 3ft). Using this example, you can determine how many bags you will need to buy.

EXAMPLE: 25 ft³/2 ft³ = 12.5

You will need to buy 13 bags of mulch.